

Does the Political Legacy of Slavery Live On?

White Southerners who live today in former slavery strongholds—a region known as the Cotton Belt—are more likely to express negative attitudes toward blacks than their fellow white Southerners who live in areas that had few slaves.

Residents of the regions where slavery was predominate are also more likely to identify as Republican and to express opposition to race-related policies such as affirmative action.

That's according to a county-by-county analysis of census data and opinion polls of more than 39,000 southern whites.

Conducted by **Avidit Acharya**, **Matthew Blackwell**, and **Maya Sen**, all assistant professors of political science, the research is believed to be the first to demonstrate quantitatively the

lasting effects of slavery on contemporary political attitudes in the South. The findings hold even when other dynamics often associated with racial animosity are factored in, such as present-day concentrations of African Americans in an area, or whether an area is urban or rural.

The findings were reported at the Politics of Race, Immigration, and Ethnicity Consortium at the University of California at Riverside in September.

How is it possible that an institution so long ago outlawed continues to influence views in the 21st century? The authors point to economic and cultural explanations. Although slavery was banned, the economic incentives to exploit former slaves persisted well into the 20th century.

“Before mechanization, cotton

was not really economically viable without massive amounts of cheap labor,” says Sen. After the Civil War, southern landowners resorted to racial violence and Jim Crow laws to coerce black field hands, depress wages, and tie tenant farmers to plantations.

The researchers also found evidence of the relationship between racial violence and economics in the historical record of lynchings. Between 1882 and 1930, lynching rates were highest where cotton was king.

By the time economic incentives to coerce black labor subsided with the introduction of machinery to harvest cotton in the 1930s, anti-black sentiment was culturally entrenched among local whites, the authors write.

Those views have simply been passed down, they argue, citing

extensive research showing that children often inherit the political attitudes of parents and peers.

The data, says Sen, point to the importance of institutional and historical legacy when understanding political views. Most quantitative studies of voters rely on contemporary influences, such as education, income, or degree of urbanity.

The findings are also in line with research on the lingering economic effects of slavery. Studies have shown that former slave populations in Africa, South and Central America, and the United States continue to experience disparity in income, school enrollment, and vaccinations.

—Susan Hagen

Census of Slavery

A new Rochester study indicates that white Southerners in counties where cotton farming, along with its underpinnings in slavery, was concentrated—shown here in an 1860 census—express more racial resentment today than other white Southerners.

